

# Between Resilience and Abandonment: Political Factors Determining Participatory Budgeting Through Digital Participatory Platforms

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## Abstract

Participatory budgeting (PB) is one of the most significant democratic innovations to enhance citizens' influence on public policy, seeing renewed growth over the last decade by merging with digital participatory platforms. However, many PB programmes fail to persist beyond their initial adoption. Which political factors affect the resilience of hybrid deployments of PB through digital platforms? Local governments, and ultimately mayors, play a pivotal role, but the extent to which political factors influence the continuity of PB programmes remains contested, with mixed evidence in the literature. To examine this relationship, we compiled a database tracking PB processes in 90 municipalities that used the Decidim platform across Catalonia from 2016 to 2025. Our findings provide insights into how political conditions shape the survival of PB initiatives. A change in the ruling party increases the likelihood of PB abandonment, though this effect is contingent upon the incoming mayor belonging to a mainstream party, particularly on the centre-left. In addition, municipalities that show signs of institutionalisation, such as prior experience in participatory processes and a participation regulatory framework, or that possess a strong local participatory culture, are more prone to sustain these initiatives.

## Keywords

Catalonia; democratic innovations; local government; participatory budgeting; participatory platforms; political factors

## 1. Introduction

Participatory budgeting (PB) has become widespread as a prominent practice of participatory governance. However, experimentation with PB by local governments has frequently resulted in sporadic or short-lived efforts that failed to endure. While an increasing number of municipalities have initiated PB programmes, with considerable investments, only a fraction has succeeded in stabilising and maintaining them over time (Francés García et al., 2024; Spada & Ryan, 2017). A critical question remains: Which political conditions determine the survival or abandonment of PB programmes? Comparatively, the abandonment of PB has received less attention than its adoption and diffusion. Although the phenomenon has been studied in Brazil, and despite some exceptions elsewhere (Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022; Kukučková & Bakoš, 2023; Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023), further research is required that addresses PB over time and identifies how PB experiences become embedded in the local context (Bartocci et al., 2023). The wave of PB experiences in Catalonia, facilitated by digital platforms like Decidim, provides an additional layer of analysis to test how political factors condition PB longevity. Further research on PB abandonment is needed not only to better grasp the conditions that can lead to the erosion of democratic innovations, but also to help their resilience.

The aim of this article is to examine the political factors that influence the continuity or abandonment of PB programmes that are hybridly supported by digital participatory platforms. Throughout the article, continuity and abandonment will be used interchangeably to refer to the two sides of the same phenomenon. Naturally, we acknowledge that the boundary between continuity and abandonment is not always clear. PB programmes may persist, but with a diminished scope, ranging from the deterioration of key features to their “sudden disappearance” (Lopes Alves & Allegretti, 2012). We opted to focus our analysis on abandonment, as it offers a clear-cut measure for quantitative analysis. If continuity can be understood as a metric for the success of a democratic innovation (Spada & Ryan, 2017), abandonment clearly represents the adverse situation of failure. While this dichotomous approach may overlook certain nuances of PB erosion, the drivers of complete abandonment likely mirror those of gradual decay and also provide clues to understand erosion.

In order to address this research question, we created a database that tracks all the 90 Catalan municipalities that implemented PB through the Decidim platform, a public-common, free, and open digital infrastructure for participatory democracy (Barandiaran et al., 2024). It has become the leading infrastructure in Catalonia due to its adoption by supra-municipal bodies, which provide technical support. Despite being enabled by the platform, the processes are predominantly hybrid, with the digital infrastructure acting as a facilitator for items such as voting or communication. The database is structured across three electoral mandates, commencing in 2015, and incorporates political and contextual information about municipalities. Beyond Catalan municipalities, this platform has been deployed in cities such as Helsinki, New York, Mexico City, Rosario, Kakogawa, and Lyon.

Although PB experiences involve multiple actors, from local bureaucracies to citizens and civil society organisations, our framework emphasises that local governments, and specifically mayors, play a pivotal role in the decisions to adopt and maintain them. This makes the lifespan of PB susceptible to the shifts inherent in electoral cycles, although institutionalisation measures, the support of local actors, and a stable platform can help mitigate such fluctuations. Our results show that political factors matter in the ongoing continuity of PB programmes. In line with other researchers, we find that the ideology of the ruling party is a relevant

factor for explaining the continuity of PB initiatives. More interestingly, nuancing the findings of some previous studies (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022; Spada, 2014), we also find that a change of the ruling party, in interaction with ideology, particularly with mainstream centre-left parties, increases the probability of abandonment. However, this disruption caused by electoral cycles is attenuated by factors such as a strong participatory culture, prior participatory experiences, or formal provisions.

## 2. The Study of PB Abandonment and Resilience

When scholars examine how democratic innovations can transform traditional governance structures, at least two key questions are relevant: their adoption and their embedding into institutional settings. Current research has extensively focused on the former: how PB programmes arise and how they spread through the territory (Chovanecek et al., 2023; Falanga & Lüchmann, 2019). However, one of the main challenges of democratic innovations is their tendency to be fragile and struggle to persist over time; PB programmes are no exception, as since their inception, they have been short-lived or easily interrupted. While studying the adoption of experiences is useful for understanding spread patterns, it does not give a comprehensive understanding of when a programme is successful over time.

Our approach to the analysis of PB abandonment differs from previous research in two ways. First, we move beyond the qualitative research tradition that has characterised the analysis of democratic innovations. While this tradition has led to fruitful analyses of PB programmes' complexities, it has also hindered the study of when these initiatives are continued and persist. A significant portion of the research has focused on case studies of best practices, which inescapably has involved a selection bias in the variability of the dependent variable, towards positive outcomes and long-lasting processes—i.e., those that persisted (Spada & Ryan, 2017). Additionally, a portion of this background has been based on cases with programmes implemented once or twice and then abandoned (Bartocci et al., 2023, p. 770). These trends make it particularly difficult to generalise evidence and to address questions concerning the continuity of PB, which is why it is pertinent to consider a larger variety of successful and unsuccessful initiatives over time. It is worth noting that, as Ryan (2021) argues, this is not to the detriment of the case study tradition. A greater accumulation of conclusions via large-*N* strategies can force us to go back to the cases and let us think about which explanations might be more crucial in those cases of particular significance.

Additionally, we expand the focus beyond Brazil. Addressing abandonment using a quantitative approach has been comparatively scarce, particularly outside Brazil, where there is an established PB tradition and the availability of the Brazilian Participatory Budgeting Census. This quantitative focus on abandonment has received less attention because it requires monitoring a high number of cases and the collection of temporal data. While there has recently been a growth in quantitative contributions investigating abandonment, mixed evidence has emerged, as different contexts involve distinct dynamics and objectives in the deployment of each PB model. PB experiences have expanded worldwide, and there is a need for quantitative approaches to examine and compare how PB performs in different contexts. In Europe, PB differs from Latin American experiences in several aspects (Sintomer et al., 2012), especially as a top-down attempt to restore citizen trust and counteract citizens' disaffection (Falanga & Lüchmann, 2019; Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2019).

The remainder of this section is organised as follows. First, we establish the relevance of the Catalan case as the primary focus of our analysis and contextualise it. We then discuss the theoretical logic underlying the abandonment of PB programmes and translate potential explanatory factors into hypotheses.

### **2.1. Particularities and Relevance of the Catalan Case**

Catalonia stands out for its tradition of participatory governance at the local level, making it a suitable case for quantitative analysis. After 2015, there has been a new wave of PB programmes due to the improvement in the economic situation, the coming to power of new parties emphasising direct participation, the support of supra-municipal institutions, and the availability of a free, open, multipurpose participatory platform. As in the rest of Spain, the features of PBs have evolved during this last surge (López Ronda & Gil-Jaurena, 2021). Processes are no longer commonly self-regulated; they have a set of rules established by the council, voting takes primacy over forms of consensus, and there is heterogeneity in the issues for debate (Francés et al., 2018).

Remarkably, although most processes now employ digital tools, most of them are hybrid and should not be seen solely as digital processes. This means that PBs, despite using a platform, maintain significant face-to-face elements and allow collective forms of participation, alongside more individualised ones (Francés et al., 2018).

This study is based on those Catalan municipalities that have implemented PB initiatives through the Decidim platform. The infrastructure is a public-common, free, and open digital support, understood as a “technopolitical project” (Barandiaran et al., 2024, pp. 51–53). It was developed by activists from the 15-M and free software movements as a way to challenge the traditional representative model of democracy and the capitalist appropriation of technology. It aims to foster a participatory democracy through a collaborative and community-driven project. Decidim represents an example of social resilience, driven by proactive civil actors who sustain an alternative initiative that can be shared and improved by other citizens, organisations, and institutions (Tomkova, 2020). These actors have established an international support network—the Decidim Association—which works collectively to enhance the platform’s democratic features. Decidim has played a key role in expanding PB across Catalan municipalities, enabling a substantial number of processes through its infrastructure and integrating both online and offline participation (Borge et al., 2023).

In addition, several factors make the Catalan case relevant to the present analysis. First, Catalonia exhibits differential administrative and political characteristics that provide enough internal variability for testing the hypotheses identified in the literature on PB abandonment. From an administrative perspective, Catalonia has a highly fragmented local landscape, encompassing small municipalities supported by supra-municipal bodies, as well as large cities with a metropolitan scope. Moreover, the Catalan party system is notably fragmented, with multiple political parties involved in local government. This configuration increases electoral competitiveness and complicates governability. Second, the Catalan case also exhibits a degree of internal homogeneity that warrants its analysis as a distinct unit, separate from other Spanish Autonomous Communities. The Catalan party system diverges from the broader Spanish system due to the presence of Catalan nationalist parties, which leads to greater fragmentation at the local level and nuances the way parties represent mainstream positions in each local context. This diversity is further increased by the presence of locally based independent lists, which are also frequent. Overall, this landscape facilitates the

emergence of governments ruled not only by mainstream parties but also by parties which are more marginal or even non-existent at the national level.

Finally, the Catalan local system, like the rest of Spain, is characterised as a strong-mayor model. In this model, the mayor has significant powers, despite not being directly elected, but appointed by the elected councillors. In Spain, this model has been consolidated due to fears of instability in the local arena during the transition to democracy. Key features include mayors' long tenures, significant executive powers, and the autonomy of local lists. The strong-mayor model—which also fits other European cases—has been used to explain the adoption of democratic innovations in local governments (Salvador & Pano, 2018). In this model, mayors act as policy entrepreneurs (e.g., Mintrom, 2019), playing a central role in adopting major local innovations and committing to measures that enhance municipal management (Salvador & Pano, 2018). However, while it is true that the mayors in Spain wield significant powers, the requirement for election—a mere plurality of the council votes rather than a full majority—opens the door to political instability. A mayor who relies only on a plurality constantly operates under the sword of Damocles, threatened by the potential formation of an alternative coalition that can use PB as a political weapon.

## ***2.2. Understanding Abandonment and Resilience: The Underlying Rationale***

The centrality of mayors in Catalan local administration, with the authority to initiate or terminate PB programmes, allows us to view the decision to continue or abandon as an expected utility calculus. Termination becomes likely when negative factors outweigh positive ones in the municipal decision-making process. The complexity of this calculus makes it impossible to establish a precise formula; however, a variety of motivations beyond substantive opposition should be taken into account. Mayors' decision-making does not occur in isolation, but is subject to the logic of the political system and the interests of key local actors (Lüchmann, 2017).

We identify five political factors that can affect the abandonment of PB programmes: changing the ruling party, the ruling party's ideology, the mayor's political vulnerability, the institutionalisation of participation, and the municipality's participatory culture. The first two focus on the mayor's specific status—specifically whether their party is an incumbent—and their ideological background. The remaining three incorporate proxies for the mayor's potential constraints. These include the mayor's dependence on other political parties for governance, past experience and formal provisions regarding participation, and the participatory context involving civic associations and citizens.

Obviously, other factors, besides political ones, have been considered. On the one hand, we acknowledge the relevance of economic factors in various countries. External shocks such as economic crises or internal financial conditions such as debt, scarcity, or restrictive flexibility in budget allocation can trigger the curtailment of democratic innovations (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Lopes Alves & Allegretti, 2012; Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). This has been the case in Spain since the 2008 financial crisis (López Ronda & Gil-Jaurena, 2021). However, because our study is situated in a post-crisis context, we focus on political factors as the main drivers of PB, treating economic variables as controls. On the other hand, while process-design and implementation features—e.g., Kukučková and Bakoš (2023) examine decreases in the PB budget, number of proposals, or voter turnout—might be relevant to PB continuity, they also present significant methodological challenges. The lack of standardised reporting and

the high variability of PB designs make it difficult to gather consistent comparative data for large-*N* quantitative analysis. Consequently, while we recognise this as a promising line of research, as argued by Fernández-Martínez and Becerril Viera (2022), these features remain outside the scope of this study.

In the next subsections, we further develop the political factors explaining PB abandonment, alongside the hypotheses that are derived from them.

### 2.2.1. Changing the Ruling Party

It has been argued that newly elected politicians tend to introduce new mechanisms, routines, and experiments, or discontinue those implemented by the previous administration (Wampler, 2008). However, prior research across different countries has yielded mixed evidence with respect to the change of the ruling party on PB continuity. A substantial portion of the quantitative Brazilian evidence (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Spada, 2014) indicates that this factor does not help to explain the continuity of PB programmes, or has only found a weak effect (Azevedo et al., 2022). In Spain, in line with the Brazilian literature, changing the ruling party does not seem to be an explanatory factor in itself; rather, it is the ideological orientation of the new ruling party that matters (Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022). Conversely, evidence from Slovakia (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023) emphasises that the continuation of those mayors who adopted the programme positively influences its long-term continuation, although often the “entrepreneur” was the civil sector, enabling the overcoming of partisan interests. It has been noted that a high level of politicisation of PB programmes made them more transformative, but also more vulnerable to abandonment (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022).

While acknowledging the mixed evidence, we hypothesise that the predominance of the strong-mayor model in the Catalan context—with clearly defined leadership roles in the local administration and, in particular, in promoting local innovation (Salvador & Pano, 2018)—will make PB programmes more vulnerable to electoral changes. We expect continuity to be compromised when a mayor who previously implemented a PB programme fails to secure re-election, as the ensuing transition can shift the priorities of the new local government. Although new mayors may decide to maintain these programmes, they also have incentives to pursue a policy break and distance themselves from their predecessors. Because of this, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Changing the ruling party increases the probability of abandoning PB programmes.

### 2.2.2. Ideological Orientation of the Local Government

Historically, left-wing parties have championed participatory governance mechanisms, and PB is no exception, as a means of fulfilling ideological commitments and reflecting the executive’s political values. It originated as a hallmark of Brazil’s Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) as part of its agenda of political change and reform. Likewise, when the model first migrated to Europe, even if supported by a widespread policy consensus, it was primarily adopted by left-leaning governments (Sintomer et al., 2012).

However, several factors have diminished the affinity between PB and specific political ideologies over time. In Europe, far from a radical mechanism of transformation, PB programmes have evolved into a “neutral”

device of good governance (Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2019), and are implemented across the ideological spectrum. In Brazil, although PB continuity was initially associated with local governments ruled by PT (Spada, 2014), it was subsequently adopted by other political parties. Some studies found unexpected effects: an increase in abandonment associated with the entry of the left, and a decrease with new parties not aligned with the left (Azevedo et al., 2022). The abandonment of PB initiatives by PT is complex and has been explained in various ways by Wampler and Goldfrank (2022). Some arguments point out that, once in power, the party shifted its focus towards alternative participatory arrangements. Other arguments emphasise that the political benefits of PBs were insufficient to serve the party's long-term electoral interests. In Spain, evidence on the implementation of participatory policies finds modest differences between ideological families, with the radical left more prone to decisiveness or intensity on these policies (Font et al., 2024). PB programmes have been adopted by political parties across different colours, although the left seems more committed to continuity (Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022). Furthermore, in Catalonia, independent political parties are common in local politics, focusing on promoting local perspectives and maintaining frequent connections with local associations that can align them with local participatory programmes.

Despite recognising the complex relationship between PB abandonment and ideology, we contend that not all parties in government are equally inclined to abandon these programmes. We posit that abandonment will be more politically costly for parties whose ideology and reputation are closely aligned with the promotion of citizen participation. Thus, we expect mainstream parties, whose reputation is less tied to democratic experimentation, to face lower costs of abandonment:

H2: Local governments ruled by mainstream parties are more likely to abandon PB programmes.

### 2.2.3. Political Vulnerability

The vulnerability of the local government, in relation to other competing political parties—i.e., having fewer seats than the majority of the local council—can impact the decision to abandon PB. In Brazil, where mayors and members of the city council, unlike in Catalonia, are chosen via a presidential system, it has been claimed that mayors would be more likely to support PB programmes to bypass city councils through plebiscitarian support. That has led some researchers to test whether being in a position of political vulnerability makes mayors more likely to support PB initiatives as a means of building a direct mandate from the citizenry (e.g., Spada, 2014). However, evidence in Brazil shows that the mayor's party's vulnerability in the city council does not affect initial adoption but decreases the probability of subsequent continuity of PB programmes (Azevedo et al., 2022; Spada, 2014).

In Catalonia, mayors are elected by the city council, and they can be invested with a plurality of seats if no absolute majority supports an alternative; nonetheless, they remain vulnerable to a vote of no confidence throughout their term. A mayor with only a plurality may form a coalition government which, although not vulnerable in itself, is likely to require more complex negotiations among coalition partners to hinder the risk of formation of an alternative coalition. In his analysis on the Brazilian case, Spada (2014, pp. 28–29) suggests that in countries where the mayor is elected by the city council, the propensity to innovate might be lower, but the survival rate higher. However, this survival might be compromised when the governing party lacks a majority of seats. The need to build coalitions and secure support from other parties requires agenda alignments that can render the continuity of PB programmes dependent on the prevailing correlation of forces.

Since PB can trigger conflict, opposition forces may exploit these challenges to catalyse the formation of an alternative governing coalition.

Taking this into account, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: The vulnerability of mayors, understood as a weaker position in government, will increase the probability of abandoning PB programmes.

#### 2.2.4. Institutionalisation (Past Experience and Formal Provisions)

The decision to abandon PB programmes may also depend on various institutionalisation dynamics, ranging from formal rules and structures, such as administrative arrangements and legal provisions, to informal practices and narratives about participation (Blanco et al., 2021). In the case of Brazil, researchers have found that the degree of politicisation versus formal institutionalisation can have an impact on the continuity of PB programmes (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022, p. 125). A high level of politicisation tends to make PB more impactful yet also more vulnerable to abandonment by subsequent governments. Instead, a more technical and formally institutionalised approach, while less transformative, is supposed to better ensure PB continuity. Although regulatory frameworks or ad-hoc rules aimed at consolidating participatory policies may help to generate expectations of continuity, they are often insufficient to consolidate the reproducibility of participatory programmes (Allegretti et al., 2021). Such provisions might be only the expression of a political commitment at a specific point in time, without necessarily binding subsequent governments.

Nevertheless, once a participatory structure is consolidated—through the establishment of dedicated administrative areas and the collaboration of and demand for it by stakeholders—it becomes harder for successive governments to dismantle (Blanco et al., 2021). Having a normalised practice promotes “path dependency” effects, which shape and facilitate the ongoing reproduction of PB programmes (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022). It is not only that key actors in the local context expect reproducibility, but also that ongoing continuity can eventually translate into a formalised programme that overcomes partisan affinities. Because of this, we expect that steps toward institutionalisation will hinder the dismantling of PB programmes:

H4: Institutionalisation of PB experiences makes the abandonment of PB programmes less likely.

#### 2.2.5. Participatory Culture and Associational Context

Finally, mayors need to consider the impact of their decisions on the context formed by the network of local associations and citizens upon which the PB is grounded. Abandonment should be more difficult when the programme is embedded through the active collaboration of these actors, as dismantling it may generate greater political and social costs than simply maintaining it. For example, the adoption of PB is often regarded as a stimulus for promoting participation in other areas (Bartocci et al., 2023). Civil organisations are vital to this ecosystem, as a weak civic fabric often results in poor PB performance (Bartocci et al., 2023). In Brazil, for instance, the demobilisation of civil society has been regarded as a possible co-explanation for the decision to abandon (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). However, the number of civil society organisations is not necessarily a guarantee of continuity; indeed, some researchers have found no correlation between the two (Azevedo et al., 2022).

The cost of abandonment is likely lower if past programmes have been associated with conflicts with local associations and citizens, or if they have been received with public indifference (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). The link between PB, citizenry, and civil society is ambivalent; although it provides a platform for citizen demands, it can also generate tensions and frictions. For example, civic organisations might feel displaced if they lose their role as intermediaries between the citizenry and the administration (Balcells et al., 2023; Ganuza et al., 2014). Furthermore, unfulfilled expectations can breed disillusionment among citizens and civic associations. If the process is not perceived to be working properly, PB can be replaced by other participatory mechanisms. Overall, we expect that local contexts with a stronger participatory culture will be more favourable for the continuity of PB programmes:

H5: A strong participatory culture will mitigate the probability of abandoning PB programmes.

### 3. Data and Methods

#### 3.1. Data and Sample

For the analyses, we rely on our own produced database, which covers the 90 municipalities that implemented PB in Catalonia since the release of the Decidim platform. The data have been organised according to a three-electoral-mandate structure with a total of 270 observations (2015–2019, 2019–2023, after 2023). This mandate structure allows us to monitor municipal observations at different stages: from the adoption or non-adoption of a PB to its continuation or abandonment, as detailed in the forthcoming discussion of our dependent variable.

Methodological and strategic reasons justify the decision to analyse data by political mandates. Firstly, it allows us to deal with the difficulty of inconsistent concurrence in implementation cycles; some PB initiatives are implemented yearly or every two years, while others are executed once per mandate or have no regular concurrence. Thus, organising the data using the mandate as a time reference enables us to resolve this problem. Secondly, organising the data by mandates allows us to establish a clear cut-off point to measure the extent to which electoral cycles affect PB continuity or abandonment. Thirdly, as outlined by Francés García et al. (2024), in the Spanish context, the survival of processes beyond a political term is infrequent, with the most prevalent profile of PBs being a two- or three-year lifespan. It is not uncommon for a process to cool down during an electoral year, which can result in a subsequent abandonment (Lopes Alves & Allegretti, 2012). A three-mandate data set is an appropriate design for our purpose and mitigates these small fluctuations and reversible interruptions.

Given the substantial difficulties involved in studying PBs—since their design choices and characteristics can vary enormously—we underscore the advantages of Decidim. Its environment, built around modular components (Palacin et al., 2024), helps to provide clean, traceable data with minimal tagging errors throughout the collection process. For example, municipalities can implement various types of PB programmes, ranging from those targeting children and young people or specific neighbourhoods to broader programmes aimed at the entire municipality. Within each type, there can also be considerable diversity in design features. However, this variation is limited in our dataset, as nearly 90% of our observations correspond to a combination of city- and district-level PB.

Despite these benefits, focusing exclusively on Decidim may entail certain limitations. If municipalities that employ Decidim possess distinctive characteristics, this could compromise the generalisability of our findings to other PB cases. For this reason, we examined whether there were statistically significant differences between municipalities implementing PB via Decidim and the full set of municipalities that have implemented PB. We found no statistically significant differences in terms of population size, a relevant variable given that the range of municipal competences depends on it. Furthermore, although Decidim was initially associated with Barcelona’s local government, where it was launched in 2015, it was rapidly adopted by other institutions not linked to the same political party. Support for Decidim from supra-municipal institutions in Catalonia has helped make it the standard and most widely used participatory platform among municipalities, including smaller ones with limited technical resources (Balcells et al., 2023). Indeed, our sample includes municipalities with different ideological orientations, party control, and contextual characteristics, as shown in the descriptive statistics in Table A.1 (in the Supplementary File).

### 3.2. Operationalisation of the Variables

Our dependent variable is shaped from a preliminary four-category typology that cross-combines: (a) whether there is at least one PB implemented during the current term ( $t$ ), and (b) a lagged measure ( $t - 1$ ) if there was a PB implemented in the preceding mandate. With this cross-combination, we have categorised four possible situations for each mandate: PB not adopted, PB first-time adoption, PB continuity, and PB abandonment. This allows us to potentially study different stages, covering the lifecycle of participatory processes from adoption to continuity or abandonment. It could even include re-adoption cases, should the sample expand in the future to cover a longer time period. An evolution across terms can be found in Figure 1.

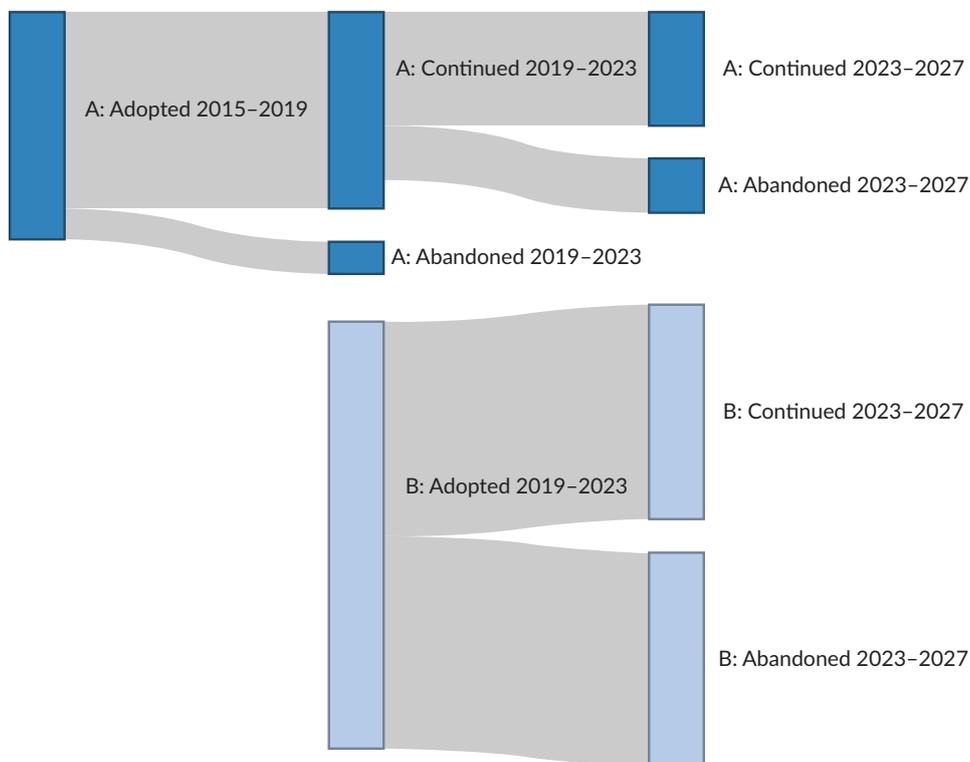


Figure 1. Evolution of the sample.

However, the dependent variable used in the models analysed in the next section is a specific subset of these cases and is specified as a dichotomous factor. It includes only observations in which PB is either continued (PB implemented in  $t$  and  $t - 1$ ) or abandoned (PB not implemented in  $t$  but implemented in  $t - 1$ ), thus yielding a binary measure distinguishing between cases where the local government decides to maintain or to terminate a PB inherited from the previous mandate. Our data contain a total of 93 continuations and 42 abandonments. Similar approaches with a dichotomous variable have also been used by most of the studies reviewed in the literature (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022; Spada, 2014). To tag continuity or abandonment in 2023–2027, an ongoing mandate, but already beyond its midpoint, we have verified, as far as possible, whether a PB programme was planned. If there is no planning, we assume that implementation will be unlikely at this stage.

To test the hypotheses, we run two logistic regression models. We also explored more complex alternative models that can be found in Section B of the Supplementary File. We organised the explanatory variables corresponding to the hypotheses. Firstly, changing the ruling party has been operationalised as a dichotomous factor that accounts for the change in the mayor's party. This indicator links information between two terms: 1 is assigned when a change is observed compared to the preceding mandate. Party names and specific coalition acronyms between election periods have been analysed on a case-by-case basis to properly label only effective changes.

Secondly, we operationalised the mayor's party ideology as a categorical variable with four groups: (a) alternative-left parties—Catalan nationalist or otherwise—such as Comuns, Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), under the Greens/EFA and The Left; (b) a centre-left party, represented by the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC), under S&D; (c) independent local parties, with various ideological orientations; and (d) centre-right parties—Catalan nationalist—such as Convergence and Union (CiU), PDeCAT, and Junts, under Renew Europe or non-inscrits. In the model detailed in the next section, the reference category will be the centre-left.

Thirdly, we operationalised the mayor's vulnerability as whether their party held the majority of seats on the council. Subsequently, regarding institutionalisation, past experience has been operationalised as the precedent cumulative number of PBs implemented in Decidim, while formal provisions are measured as a dichotomous factor that indicates whether the municipality had an active participation-regulatory framework in the specific mandate. Ultimately, to assess the degree of participatory culture, we have defined two tentative proxies, although they do not encompass the entire phenomenon: (a) a standardised measure of the percentage of turnout in the current mandate's local elections; and (b) civil organisation density, measured as the number of civil organisations per capita in the municipality.

We have included different control variables, starting with the population size of the municipality, categorised into two groups depending on whether the municipality has fewer than 5,000 residents or more. Initially, we employed an ordinal categorisation following the size tiers defined by Spanish legislation, as this was substantively relevant and empirically allowed us to capture potential non-linearities in the effect of population size on abandonment. After estimating the models, however, the higher categories of the variable did not display significant differences among themselves, so we opted for a simplified dichotomous version (small municipalities vs. all other sizes). This decision was supported by the information criteria for model fit, the Bayesian (BIC) and Akaike (AIC) information criteria, which take into account the complexity of

the models in terms of the number of parameters. It is also important to note that the models show some sensitivity with respect to the population variable used. The scale of the municipality is closely associated with some factors introduced in the model, such as the parties in government or the administrative and regulatory capacities, among others. For this reason, an alternative model using the logarithmic population scale, which reduces the risk of multicollinearity, can be found in Table B.1 of the Supplementary File.

Each mandate year has been included to fix time-effects in order to address a major number of the temporal confounders, with the category of reference in the 2015–2019 term. Its introduction in the model helps control major political waves associated with our main independent variables. Finally, we have employed two variables that consider the socioeconomic context and the financial capacity of the municipalities. On the one hand, a Small Area Socioeconomic Index (IST)—a synthetic index that summarises socioeconomic characteristics at a local level, such as employment, educational level, immigration, and income—is employed to have a general control on socioeconomic confounders. On the other hand, the municipal debt per capita has been included to control for potential financial constraints on the local governments. More detailed information on the variables employed can be found in Table A.1 of the Supplementary File.

## 4. Results

Overall, our statistical results illustrate the significance of political variables in explaining PB abandonment, even after controlling for other factors. To test the hypotheses, we estimated two different models (see Table 1). Model 1 serves as the baseline for the analysis, while Model 2 introduces an interaction term to further examine the relationship between a change of the ruling party and ideology. Both models show a good fit, with a pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.68 and 0.71, respectively; but, given the results of the BIC and AIC, the second model is favoured for its predictive fitness. Marginal effects can be consulted in the Supplementary File (Section C). The VIF tests reveal no relevant multicollinearity.

In support of H1, we find in Model 1 that a change of ruling party increases the probability of PB abandonment. This suggests that an electoral shift disrupts continuity regardless of the ideology of the new ruling party, highlighting the vulnerability of PB programmes to electoral cycles. This statement, however, will be nuanced when examining Model 2. Regarding H2, we find only partial support. We initially expected mainstream parties—categorised as centre-right and centre-left in our model—to be more likely to abandon PB programmes than other parties. This expectation was based on the assumption that the alternative-left and independent parties are more closely identified with pro-participatory policies, making them more vulnerable to the reputational costs of abandonment. However, our findings indicate that H2 applies only to the centre-left, but not to the centre-right.

The interaction results in Model 2 provide a more precise picture of how these two variables operate, allowing us to test whether both ideology and a change in the mayoralty work together. We find that the effect of changing the ruling party on abandonment occurs when the incoming mayor belongs to the centre-left, that is, the PSC. For the sake of robustness, we examined the interaction between ideology and change of the ruling party for all other party categories. However, as already shown in Model 1, the centre-left is the only party category with a significantly divergent profile (note that this group was used in Model 1 as the reference category).

The PSC is the mainstream centre-left party in Catalonia, boasting a strong presence in metropolitan areas and a long history as a key actor in local politics. While PSC-led governments have in some cases adopted PB programmes, they are also more likely to dismantle them, when compared to other parties. This trend must be understood within the broader context of Catalan politics. Driven by social unrest due to the financial crisis and the rising independence movement, the 2010s saw the PSC displaced by other parties more sympathetic to direct democracy. However, as the PSC has recovered its political hegemony, it may have become increasingly sceptical of such innovative experiments. Interestingly, this effect is not observed within the centre-right, which includes Catalan nationalist parties like Junts or PDeCAT, with a stronger presence in small and mid-sized municipalities outside the metropolitan region of Barcelona. This discrepancy with regard to the socialist party warrants further investigation, though it could be understandable given the Catalan political context of intense competition within the pro-independence bloc.

Against H3, we find no evidence that the vulnerability of the mayor—understood as getting only a plurality of the council seats—has any effect on the probability of PB abandonment. It could be that our measure of political vulnerability is not able to capture the complexity of local politics and the way coalition dynamics work. However, and being cautious due to differentiated electoral systems, this result seems consistent with the Brazilian evidence, and does not support Spada's (2014) intuition that vulnerability in countries where mayors are elected by the local council may encourage continuity.

As predicted by H4, accumulated prior experience with PB is associated with its continuity. This suggests a learning process within local administrative structures and the development of positive expectations among the public, both of which facilitate the institutionalisation of this participatory policy through path dependency or a ratchet effect. In addition, having a participation regulatory framework also helps PB continuity, an effect that persists alongside past experience. However, as Spada (2023) suggests, there is a natural tendency for PB programmes to erode once the “novelty effect” of the process fades. Therefore, time can exert a dual influence on PB programmes, acting both as an eroding and a consolidating force. Because our study focuses on municipalities that have already adopted PB, if the likelihood of abandonment naturally increases as programmes age, that can explain the statistical significance of the 2023 mandate. However, this trend is countered by the accumulation of successive PB experiences over time, which fortifies its long-term survival.

In line with H5, both turnout in local elections and civic association density are positively associated with PB continuity. These variables are proxies that capture the capacity of political mobilisation among the local population and, consequently, the potential audience for PB programmes. As expected, a more dynamic and participative citizenry and civil society increase the political cost of abandoning PB and thus effectively act as a safeguard for these initiatives.

Finally, regarding the control variables, none of the economic controls reach statistical significance. Interestingly, no relationship was found between municipal debt and the probability of PB abandonment. This finding is consistent with a context of reduced financial pressure compared to previous periods, particularly the austerity period following the 2008 economic crisis, when participatory policies were frequently cancelled due to a lack of resources. As would be expected, municipality size significantly impacts the probability of abandonment: More populous municipalities—which typically possess higher resources and capacities—are less likely to abandon PB programmes.

**Table 1.** Logistic regression results. Dependent variable: PB continuity.

	Model 1	Model 2
Ruling party change	-2.69** (1.12)	-1.78 (1.21)
Ideology 4 cat: alternative-left	2.77** (1.19)	
Ideology 4 cat: centre-right	2.95** (1.52)	
Ideology 4 cat: independent	3.05* (1.71)	
Ideology 2 cat: centre-left	(Ref. category)	-2.32* (1.22)
Ruling party change*centre-left		-5.37** (2.57)
Historical accumulated PB	2.73*** (0.64)	3.25*** (0.81)
Participation regulation	2.34** (1.14)	2.39** (1.21)
Turnout % (standardised)	0.22*** (0.07)	0.25*** (0.08)
Associative density	1.14* (0.62)	1.47** (0.68)
Majority	1.13 (0.93)	1.26 (1.00)
Inhabitants: $\geq 5,000$	6.12*** (1.86)	7.20*** (2.17)
IST	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
Debt per capita	-0.34 (1.93)	0.38 (1.95)
Mandate 2019	-3.53* (2.00)	-2.92 (2.03)
Mandate 2023	-7.80*** (2.33)	-8.25*** (2.56)
(Intercept)	-33.11*** (9.87)	-36.73*** (11.00)
N	135	135
AIC	83.89	76.44
BIC	127.47	117.11
Pseudo $R^2$	0.68	0.71
Chi-square	113.50	118.95

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.1$ ; Model 1 ideology's reference category is centre-left; in Model 2 it is the rest of the parties.

## 5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of PB abandonment through evidence from Catalonia, which offers a representative European case with a strong tradition of participatory policy. Overall, the findings show that political factors play a significant role in PB abandonment, even when controlling for economic variables. While this centrality of political factors is generally acknowledged by previous studies, our findings add detail to previous literature.

We find that the survival of PB initiatives is intrinsically related to electoral cycles. A change of the ruling party, in interaction with ideology, increases the probability of abandonment—nuancing a portion of the precedent literature, which found no effect (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Fernández-Martínez & Becerril Viera, 2022; Spada, 2014). The salient role of “strong mayors” places them in a prominent position towards innovation. A new mayor may be incentivised to innovate by adopting (or continuing) a PB programme. As a symbolic policy instrument, PB is often endowed with an aura of participation and transparency, serving as an easily marketable “good governance” brand. However, because its concrete impact on governance quality is often unclear—particularly when contrasted with the Brazilian experience—it can also be abandoned without incurring significant political peril. Leadership changes resulting from electoral processes create a window of opportunity for policy shifts, marking a critical juncture where PB is most vulnerable to abandonment. Our findings suggest that not all political parties behave in the same way; specifically, mainstream parties—whose reputations are less tied to participatory innovation—show a higher inclination toward abandoning PB. In our study, this is exemplified by the PSC, a dominant centre-left mainstream party in Catalonia.

The effect of a new ruling party is counterbalanced by other factors that facilitate the continuity of PB initiatives. Among these, prior experience with PB remains a crucial explanatory variable, as pointed out by previous studies (Bezerra & Junqueira, 2022; Spada, 2014). Additionally, the adoption of a regulatory framework is a key factor, and our study contributes to the limited number of existing studies that examine the role of formal PB regulations (Allegretti et al., 2021; Murray Svidroňová et al., 2023). Contextual elements related to participatory culture also help PB survival, although other studies using similar proxies found no significant association (Azevedo et al., 2022). The decision to continue or abandon PB programmes is inextricably connected to the expectations of the stakeholders involved in the process. When widely supported and accepted, participatory structures are harder to dismantle, as their removal can carry political or reputational costs.

Our study represents a further contribution to the analysis of participatory processes using Decidim. Despite its limitations, this digital platform provides a harmonised infrastructure, which enhances the systematic measurement and comparison of these initiatives. However, our results come with some caveats. To begin with, the number of municipalities and PBs using Decidim infrastructure is still growing. Thus, we expect to have a stronger sample in the future, when the timeline and the number of municipalities increase. In addition, to better understand patterns of continuity and abandonment, further attention is needed on how PB processes are internally designed, as proposed by Fernández-Martínez and Becerril Viera (2022). The conclusions would also gain robustness if we could expand the explanatory factors to include perceptions from key actors—participants, organisations, public administrators, local representatives, etc.—involved in the processes. As further research, to tackle some of these issues, we plan to conduct

interviews to triangulate the findings derived from our statistical analysis and better identify and understand the mechanisms behind PB abandonment. Although this conclusion goes beyond our findings, the availability of the public-common platform Decidim—supported by an active community and backed by a decade of implementation in numerous cities and towns—could contribute to the long-term resilience of PB programmes in Catalonia, as specific case studies suggest (Mérida & Francés, 2025).

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data that support the findings are publicly available in the CORA repository at <https://doi.org/10.34810/data2178>

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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